

Show Me... 2002 Consumer's Guide to Hospital Surgery Volume

Over the last several decades a steady stream of research has found a relationship between the quality of care for selected surgical procedures and the number, or volume, of procedures performed. Recently, the prestigious Institute of Medicine (IOM) convened a group to review the current understanding of this relationship. The report states the following:

“An association between higher volumes and better outcomes has been well-documented for certain types of health care. Some health care purchasers are using these findings to refer patients to higher-volume settings for selected procedures. The evidence prompted the National Cancer Center Policy Board to recommend that cancer patients in need of highly complex surgical procedures go to higher-volume facilities for care (IOM, 1999). Despite considerable evidence of a volume-outcome relationship, many questions remain about the nature of the relationship, the processes of care that might explain it, and its implication for health policy.” [IOM, 2000]

The link between procedure volume and outcome is not always found. In fact, at times one study may contradict the findings of another study. Why does this happen? Sometimes these differences are due to the quality of the research conducted. Other times, the differences may relate to different methods of study, or even the population studied. Regardless, there is sufficient evidence to say that for some procedures a relationship exists between the volume of procedures performed and the quality of the outcomes for those procedures.

Does “practice make perfect?” Or does “perfect make practice?”

While studies have been conducted on the relationship between procedure volume and quality outcomes, yet another set of questions has been raised: Does “practice make perfect”? or does “perfect make practice”? In other words, when a relationship is found between procedure volume and the quality of outcomes for that procedure, what does it really mean? Is it true that the more you do anything, whether it is music or medicine, the better you perform? Or rather, is it true that “success breeds success”? That is, when an organization is known for a good product or good service it gets more business.

Applied in this instance, hospitals that perform certain surgeries well will have more patients seeking those surgeries at those hospitals. Both points-of-view make sense, and to some extent, the exact nature of the relationship between the number of procedures performed and quality is not known. But either way, for the procedures chosen for this guide there is a relationship and that relationship should inform your decisions about health care services and surgeries.

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